



Aerial shot of Tukuraki village

Refusing to DISAPPEAR:

climate change displacement - a reality in the Pacific

We are famous for our white sandy beaches and crystal waters in the Pacific but our region is also amongst the first to witness displacement of people caused by climate change.

Being at the forefront of climate change means for Pacific peoples that the risk of disasters such as cyclones, droughts, storm surges and landslides are predicted to worsen with many communities already witnessing changed weather patterns.

The Pacific has inevitably found itself also at the forefront of adaptation to strengthen its resilience: we are learning how to adapt to the risks brought on by climate change and disaster through navigating the challenges presented by it.

The Building Safety Resilience in the Pacific (BSRP) Project, funded by the European Union and implemented by the Pacific Community, is a project that provides 15 Pacific countries, including Timor-Leste, with scientific and technical expertise to reduce the vulnerability caused by disasters and climate change including the reduction of environmental losses, social impacts and economic costs.

The reality of climate change and increased severity of disasters mean many communities are at risk of losing their traditional homeland, as tides chip away at the shoreline, sea levels continue to rise and inland communities are struck with disasters such as landslides; leaving many communities devoid of safer and more disaster resilient land.

Recently, the BSRP project, in partnership with the Fiji government assisted with the successful relocation of Tukuraki village, the first inland indigenous community to be

relocated in the country.

In Fiji, 600 communities have been identified for relocation from the impacts of climate change, Tukuraki Village is one of the 46 priority communities for immediate relocation.

The story of resilience displayed by the people of Tukuraki village, amidst disasters, serves as a lesson for all, on the reality of what climate change looks like in the Pacific and how we, as a region, should adapt development practices to support sustainable development.

One of the significant lessons of relocating an entire village is the impact it can have on traditional roles and cultural implications. The loss of land and how the adoption of new land affects the way people relate to their traditional practices and each other is a challenge that Tukuraki Village had to carefully navigate through during its relocation process.

MULTIPLE DISASTERS PUMMEL TUKURAKI

In January 2012, Tukuraki Village received more than 939mm of rainfall in three days, more than double the average monthly rainfall for January, causing a landslide that buried the community and tragically killed a family with two small children.

The landslide decimated 80% of the village – destroying road access, water supply, homes and crops critical for the community's subsistence living.

The Mineral Resources Department which had to use a helicopter to access the remote village deemed it unstable for habitation and the community now had to flee their homes, just eight hours after the disaster.

For indigenous Fijian communities, to relocate also means leaving behind customary land which are inextricably linked to their traditional practices and identity.

Livai Kididromo, the village spokesperson said it was an emotional time for his community.

“For almost two years we lived in different locations without our extended families,” he said.

“As Fijians, the land is everything, it connects us to each other and it is what keeps us grounded. Through the land we know where we stand. When we lost our village, we didn't know whether we would ever get it back. We were lost.”

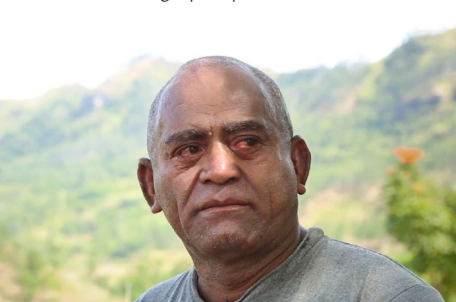
Fleeing their village fragmented the community: some moving to urban areas to live with relatives and others choosing to weather the storm and build temporary homes along the narrow edges of roadway, in the hope the community could rebuild.

However, their doubts and fears about the future of their village worsened when they were hit by Cyclone Evan (Category 4) 11 months after their initial displacement (2012) and in 2016, Tropical Cyclone Winston (Category 5), the strongest ever recorded cyclone to devastate Fiji's shores, destroyed their makeshift village. These multiple disasters forced the community into caves where they lived for weeks, to protect themselves from the destruction of cyclonic winds.

For Mr Kididromo, carrying out his traditional role as the village spokesman was impossible.

“Living apart is quite difficult, especially when we aren't in our own village and have to depend on others to survive,” he said. “Displacement affects everyone, it affects our children and their schooling, and it affects our church obligations and our vanua (traditional) obligations.”

Livai village spokesperson



Tukuraki - Honey Boxes as part of the sustainable livelihoods project implemented by the Fiji Gov



RELOCATION CHALLENGES IN THE PACIFIC

Land tenure structures in most Pacific countries is closely connected to traditional practices, culture and family lineage: in Fiji, reference to land includes the ocean for those in coastal communities.

Land-owning units (mataqali) govern land ownership; one's land connotes ancestral responsibilities and cultural practices, the capacity therefore to relocate communities due to disaster risk or climate change can be a challenge.

In the case of Tukuraki, the community approached mataqali Yalimara through traditional protocols for assistance; the latter gifted a piece of land to the Tukuraki community which allowed them to rebuild and bring back those who had fled to relatives in urban centres.

It is an uncommon practice for land to be shared freely between two clans. The unique circumstance Tukuraki found themselves in, opened up the conversation around land negotiations for displaced communities.

"We are very proud people, our old village provided us with everything we needed until the landslide. For us, it was difficult to ask for the land to live on because we knew how much value the land holds to our Fijian people," Simone Deruru, the Tukuraki turaga-ni-koro (village headman) said when discussing the difficulties of negotiating traditional dynamics in their negotiation process.

"The issue that concerned landowners was the conditions around giving their piece of land to another village to own. The people of Tukuraki needed a place where they could rebuild, a place where their future generations would live and most importantly a place where it was safe and protected from disaster.

"At that time, mataqali Yalimara were leasing

that particular land for agricultural use so the decision to gift the land to another village meant losing a source of income."

After many talanoa sessions around the kava bowl, the mataqali Yalimara decided to support the community of Tukuraki; it is known that the subject of land ownership is a sensitive topic for indigenous Fijians, and even more so when vulnerable communities are in this situation.

The loss of land is more than just about losing their homes, it is about losing their claim to be legitimate. By re-establishing their village, the people of Tukuraki were able to rebuild their homes but more importantly, reaffirm their "belonging" as a people to the land and its practices.

A NEW, DISASTER RESILIENT TUKURAKI

The cost of rebuilding the village was FJ\$756,000 or US\$363,000 – an estimate cost of an average home in most developed countries but the Tukuraki project comprised 11 homes, road ways, drainage, an evacuation centre built to the highest cyclone certification level, a playground and clean and safe drinking water.

The land negotiations were complete in November 2015, reconstruction began in June 2016 and the community moved into their new homes in October 2017.

The new site was assessed by the Mineral Resources Department to ensure it was suitable for the community to rebuild without further risk of disaster. Once the village was complete, all buildings were built to code and certified by the health department.

The BSRP project support included the construction of a retaining wall to prevent soil erosion, a drainage system to strengthen soil capacity and installed 10 water storage tanks

that supplies water for the whole community.

In addition to the homes, Tukuraki was assisted by sustainable livelihood projects with a tilapia pond, a poultry farm and capacity for honey production with 15 bee hives, ensuring food source and income-generation for the community.

The rebuilding of the new Tukuraki village was led by the Government of Fiji in partnership with the Pacific Community (SPC) team.

"For the first time in a long time, I can confidently say we feel safe in our new community and optimistic about the future. This process has not been easy but it has been worth the sacrifice," Mr Deruru said.

"My children will grow up in this community and they will consider this new location their home. When they think about where they come from, they will think about the new Tukuraki."

Dr Audrey Aumua, the Deputy Director General of the Pacific Community said the relocation project of Tukuraki manifested the best of partnerships.

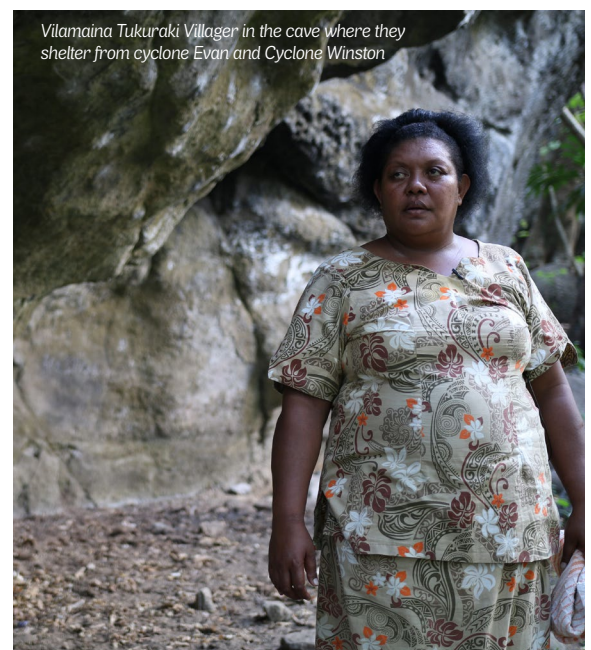
"We provided a lot of scientific and evidence-based solutions for the relocation project and celebrate an incredible outcome of partnership between development partners and stakeholders support," she said.

"The most important aspect for us has been the lessons learnt because there will be increased need of disaster management in the Pacific, particularly in terms of approaching development issues with a combination of scientific and traditional considerations."

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Vilamaina Tukuraki Villager in the cave where they shelter from cyclone Evan and Cyclone Winston